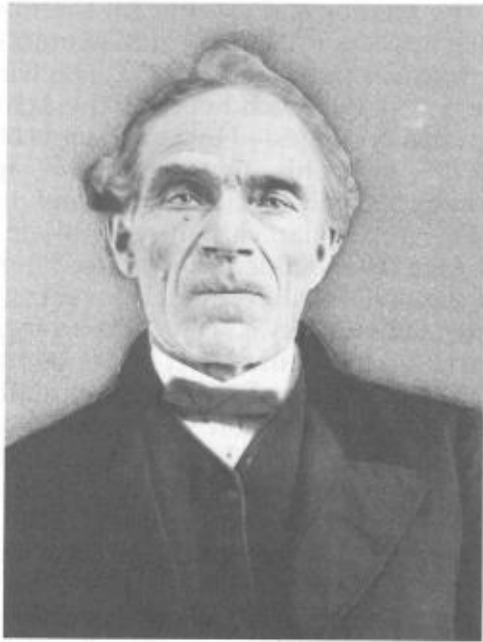
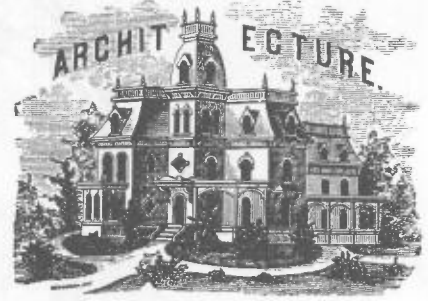


A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Thomas M. Lord
1806-1880

Down the Maine coast, east of Penobscot Bay, lies the little sea-faring village of Blue Hill. Its houses cluster around a narrow harbor and are scattered up the side of the abrupt, spruce-covered hill from which the town derives its name. Here during the middle years of the last century lived Thomas Lord, carpenter and joiner, who could turn his hand to anything from a church to a coffin. His simple craftsman's life suggested the figure of Thomas Winship in Mary Ellen Chase's novel of her native Blue Hill, *Silas Crockett*; and Talbot Hamlin in his *Greek Revival Architecture in America* mentions his work with appreciation. But the documents in the possession of descendants of Lord have not till now been studied in reference to the buildings themselves. They consist of diaries and lists owned by Miss Florence Morse of Blue Hill, a granddaughter of Lord; and drawings owned by Arthur Havlin of Dedham, Massachusetts, a great-grandson of Lord, and by Colby College, Waterville, Maine (gift of Miss Morse).

These documents are invaluable, for they reveal Lord as one of the few known personalities among the host of usually anonymous carpenter-builders whose work lends so much flavor to the New England scene. Furthermore, Lord is no mere run-of-the-mill builder; we shall see to what good effect he translates the academic Greek Revival into a very personal vernacular, exploiting the construction possibilities of wood. But perhaps the most interesting fact brought out by these papers is a contrast between the carpenter-housewright and the architect-designer. For among Lord's papers were found some drawings signed by one B. S. Deane, "architect", as well as designs by Lord himself.

Born in Surry, Maine, February 10, 1806, Lord began his trade in May, 1828. Two months before he died on July 20, 1880, he sums up his life work in these words: "Have worked on 83 vessels, more or less." This is followed by a list: 84 dwelling houses, 12 school houses, 14 meeting houses, 15 barns and sheds and other public buildings, 10 stern mouldings and heads, and 250 coffins. He adds that he built "5 stores besides sashes and blinds and other works," and concludes "its a work of 52 years." For the rest, we know from the annotations in his occasional diaries that he sawed and split wood most of the winter months, went to meeting every Sunday, and spent his odd moments at such occupations as "repairing, and making of whiple trees." His chief employer appears to have been George Stevens, the leading citizen of the town, merchant and shipbuilder, for whom he built and repaired store buildings, carved figure heads, and did the "whole joiner work" of at least one ship, for which he was paid \$675 in full. He could not have had much formal education, for he spelt badly and his handwriting resembles that of a child. As a matter of fact, he must have left school early, for at fifteen years of age he was grinding bark at Ellsworth and "driving an old horse." Sick the next year, when he was seventeen he sailed in his uncle's ship and worked on his uncle's farm. Perhaps because of ill-health, he put off deciding on his life work until he was twenty-two, when he apprenticed himself to a carpenter.

On the basis of these few documents we may conclude that Lord had no academic background, took up a trade relatively late, and had no pretensions

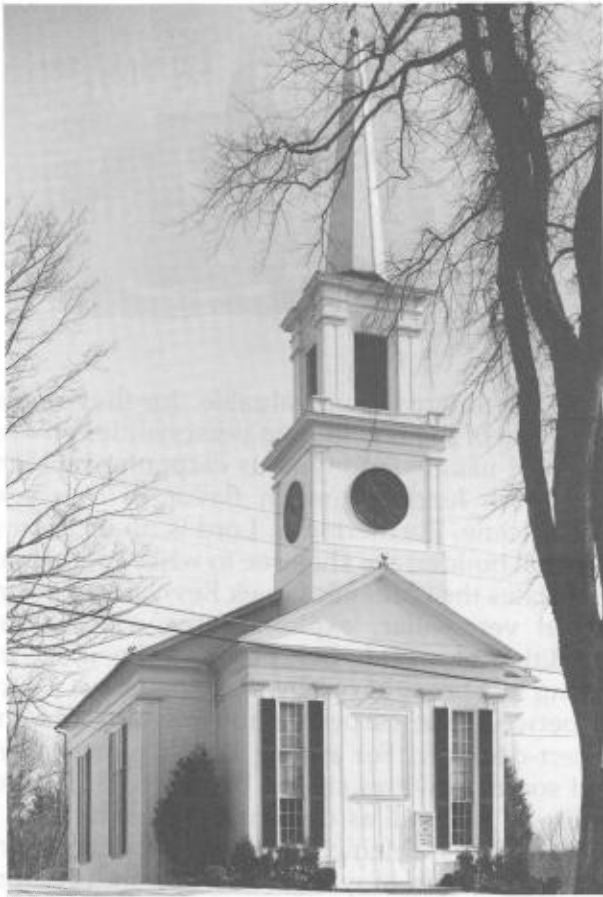


Figure 1. Baptist Church, Blue Hill, 1976 view (MHPC).

of architectural learning. The few drawings which he left corroborate these conclusions, for they are comparatively crude and architecturally illiterate. They are undoubtedly by him, for they are annotated in the same hand that wrote the diaries and lists.

Altogether Lord worked in fourteen towns, according to his list, but chiefly at minor carpentry. His diary contains references to trips in connection with shipbuilding, and he speaks of going "to Merrill, Deer Isle shingling, planing desks and blinds." Out of the carpentry of a lifetime only the most interesting of his buildings will be discussed here: the meeting houses and two typical dwellings.

The meeting houses can be divided into two definite stylistic groups, and the contrast between the two can be most effectively illustrated by a comparison of the two church buildings at Blue Hill: the charming and academically correct Congregational meeting house, and the Baptist church, equally charming, but outlandish in proportion and detail (Figure 1). We know that both were built by Lord, but it can be proved that the architect Benjamin S. Deane was the designer of the former.¹ The drawings among Lord's papers signed by Deane's name and followed by the word "architect" are undoubtedly for this building. The framework, where exposed in the attic and cellar, corresponds perfectly

with the structural diagrams, and the fenestration in building and drawings coincides. The drawings for details also correspond in form and in measurement to those in the actual building.

Perhaps the most outstanding quality of the Congregational church, in comparison with many of the group under consideration, is its academic correctness. The impression is one of good proportion, and none of the detail would offend a sensibility trained in an understanding of the classical orders. In other words, the building is evidently by a professional, as indeed Deane signs himself. Specifically, the order used on the interior and exterior (in the tower) is that which appears in plate 13 of Benjamin's *Practice of Architecture* published in 1833. The windows are of the type of the Erechtheum on the Acropolis, and are probably suggested by adaptations of them by Edward Shaw in his "Ionic cottages", appearing in plates 21-22 and 27-28 from his *Rural Architecture* (1843), a popular carpentry book in New England. Like other builders, Deane used these text books of classical details as models for correctness, but his own individuality is seen in the arrangement of the parts, that is in the effect of the building as a whole. The delicate and prominent mouldings of the openings, the insertion of a panel and two moulding strips in the pilaster give an effect of graceful lightness which is reminiscent of the earlier Adam style. This effect is accentuated by the use of the fan light. But in spite of this lightness the fundamental detail, as we have seen, is that of the Greek Revival, and the effect of the whole area of the facade and of the flanks as well is one of heavier simplicity than is common in the style of the Early Republic. This is because the detail is sparsely used, and is separated by large areas of unadorned wall space, as is typical of the Greek Revival. The tower is as correctly Greek as the rest of the building. The feeling of heavy solidity is more marked in the interior. The pilastered motif on the pulpit wall and the base of the balcony are the only accents in an interior otherwise undecorated except for a heavy cornice and the frames of the windows.

The Baptist church was built in 1856. It reflects almost no influence from the earlier Congregational church on the other side of town. It is as though Lord felt that the newer, and to him apparently more vital, Baptist faith to which he was converted (though he returned to the Congregationalists later in life) should have a less conventional house. Only the Doric order in its general proportions, some of the detail of the tower, and the motif of the pulpit wall reflect Deane's correctness. The only other academic portion is the base of the choir gallery at the opposite end of the interior which is inspired (but in general form only, not in detail) by a design for a gallery in Benjamin's *Practice of Architecture*. The shape of the tower of the Congregational church is followed in general, but the top story is in the form of a square instead of an octagon, and there is no intervening block with its graceful panel.

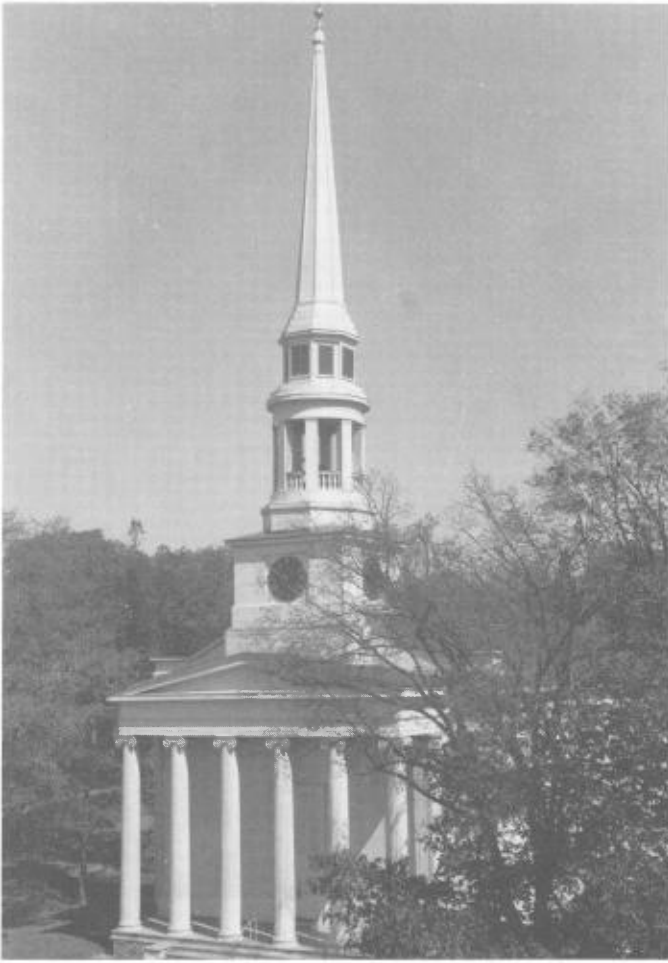


Figure 2. Congregational Church, Ellsworth, 1945 view (MHPC).

In the interior of the church the pilasters and entablature behind the pulpit have their starting point in Deane's similar motif in the Congregational church, but are much more elaborate and heavily ornate. The panels of the pilasters have a series of curved mouldings of the sort usually employed in a cornice, but used vertically here instead of horizontally, giving a rather unhappy effect. The cornice is bracketed in a vaguely Corinthian way, with none of Benjamin's correctness. How cavalier Lord can be in his treatment of the orders can be seen by comparing Deane's elegantly detailed gallery at the Congregational church with the very casual capitals at the Baptist church. Here the Ionic volutes are carved as though the order were originally conceived in wood. They are rounded and smoothly wooden; all the stoney sharpness and precision is gone. The effect of this casual attitude toward the academic is further enhanced by the prominence given to a decorative motif over the interior windows and on the facade and tower. This motif, consisting of a boldly carved rosette flanked by foliate curves, is a sort of trade mark or signature, which Lord also used in his own house and in the churches at Brooklin and West Brooksville. Another naive element, though not appearing in any other of his buildings,

is a sort of inverted urn which he inserts at the top of the pilaster panel as an emphasis to its upper part.

All of these variations and personal idiosyncrasies merely indicate Lord's unacademic tastes. A more positive quality shown is his sense of proportion, which is quite personal. The great elongation of the door and windows of the facade is most unusual. The two windows, for example, give almost an effect of two narrow panels. This elongation is accented by the emphatic stripping of the pilasters, not with the two thin strips used by Deane in the Congregational church but with two thick mouldings dividing the pilasters into three vertical areas. The effect of attenuation is accented by the sparing use of decoration, the presence of his "motif" over the door, and the strange ornamentation below the pilaster capital. This facade is an altogether curious one, for within the framework of typical Greek Revival Lord manages to create a quite different effect. The Baptist church gives a kind of homely and indigenous accent to the part of town which clings to the base of Blue Hill against whose precipitous rise the steeple is silhouetted. It is in great contrast to the academic refinement of Deane's church on the other side of town. Each has a beauty of its own. Lord's may be a little more interesting, because it is unique, while Deane's follows more closely a conventional manner.

The two contrasting styles of churches built by Lord are thus epitomized in the two Blue Hill buildings, one of his own design, and one designed by Deane. It would be convenient, although incorrect, if it could be said that Deane was responsible for the design of other academic buildings erected by Lord at Ellsworth² (Figure 2), Surry, and South Penobscot. The church at neighboring North Sedgwick could also have been designed by a more professional hand; though it is undoubtedly Lord's, for among his papers there is a crude plan with marginal instructions, the details of which correspond exactly with the finished building. It has none of the boldly naive originality of his Blue Hill Baptist church, but it could very well have been put together by Lord from the drawings for the Blue Hill Congregational church in his possession, for the interior details are the same as in that building. The exterior, though simple, is also professional looking. The only naive element in the design is a strange piece of carving surrounding the painted date, "1845" in the pediment. Very similar in its floriate elaboration to the ship carving of the period, it was probably an outgrowth of Lord's experience as a carver of ship decoration. At any rate it adds an unusual and pleasant feature to an otherwise dull little building.

In contrast to these academic buildings put up by Lord, but either designed by Deane or inspired by him, there are a few done in what may be called Lord's own personal style, as exemplified by his Baptist church in Blue Hill. Among them are the Baptist meeting houses in Brooklin and West Brooksville.



Figure 3. Drawing of the Baptist Church, Brooklin, by Thomas M. Lord, 1853 (MHPC).

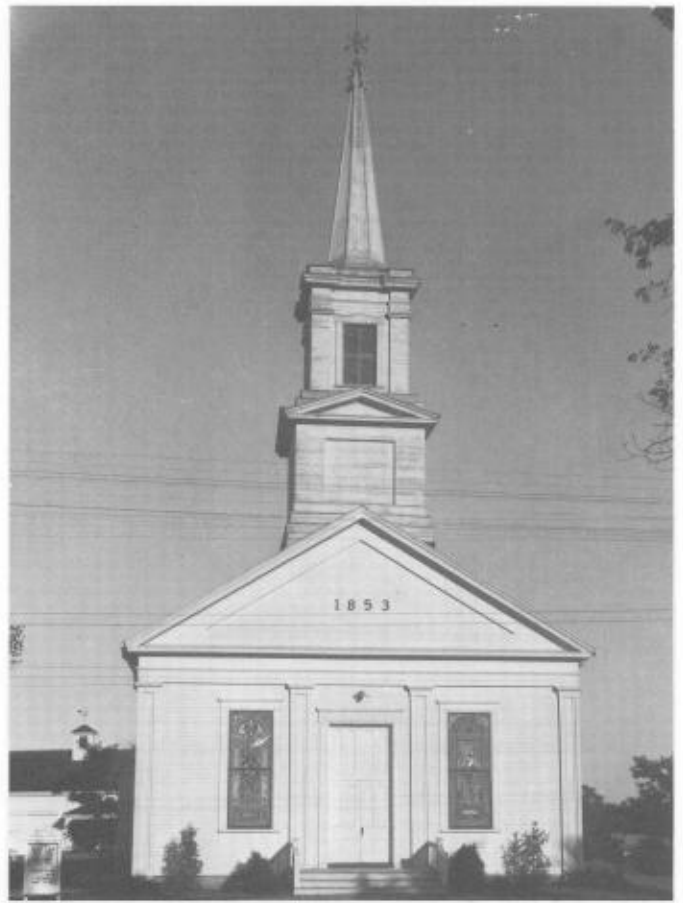


Figure 4. Baptist Church, Brooklin, 1945 view (MHPC).

The Brooklin building is less interesting than the one at Blue Hill (Figures 3 & 4). Instead of the successfully original proportions of the latter facade, there is a kind of awkwardness of the arrangement of the parts in the Brooklin building. The windows are placed clumsily, crowding each side of the entrance. The tower, though more original than Lord's at Blue Hill (which follows Deane's in the Congregational church), lacks nicety of proportion. The heavy, even ornate, entablature of the second story contrasts unhappily with the plain lower story with its more geometric simplicity of form. The use of a capital consisting of a row of leaves such as that used in the Gothic Revival, and the addition of Gothic-like scrolls to the steeple as a sort of finial are further indications of Lord's unacademic approach. But, though the building lacks nicety of proportion, there is a sort of rugged solidity about it.

There are two drawings by Lord for this church. The one reproduced shows the closest approximation to the tower as it was built. The only noteworthy changes made in the actual building were the addition of Lord's signature (the motif of the rosette surrounded by scrolls), and, more significant, the panel, indicated in the drawings, thus giving the pleasing effect already mentioned. The other drawing, not reproduced, is closer to the facade as it exists. The windows are not so close to the door, and

the narrow proportions are more pleasing. But the facade would have been better handled in the manner indicated in the first drawing. The drawings themselves are characteristic of all Lord's drawings. Careless and amateurish, they must have served only as notes or suggestions of what he actually carried out in wood, which is neat and competent.

The Brooklin and Blue Hill churches then, share a kind of originality which has a naive charm and gives the flavor of a definite architectural personality to two small Maine coast communities. Nevertheless, in the judgement of some, they might be considered as examples of a merely uneducated and crude handling of a style whose qualities Lord was unable to appreciate. But when his church at West Brooksville is seen, even the most academically prejudiced taste will be impressed with another kind of beauty than an academic one (Figure 5). In his respect for the materials and tools of his craft Lord has created a truly wooden architecture within the general confines of the Greek Revival style. The orders are interpreted in the language of carpentry with a nicety of joinery which exploits all the construction possibilities of wood. Though Lord stands in no awe of Greek details, as we have seen, he senses the essentials of their proportion; he interprets the academic orders in the vernacular of carpentry. Especially notable at West Brooksville is

the treatment of the pediment and of the entablatures. The simplification of the classical forms to three smoothly joined planes, one above the other, is a particularly happy solution in wood. This series of three is also an important element of the design as a whole, appearing in the detail of the tower and in the three stages of the tower itself. The monumentality of effect, the easy broad transition of masses, and the simple detail of the handsome Ellsworth church is reflected in this less correct but nearly as impressive building at West Brooksville. But its chief beauty remains in its homely charm and in the forthrightness which derives from the exploitation of the medium of wood.

Finally, a consideration of two of Lord's houses will add a little to the total impression of his work. The most pretentious of these is the house owned now by Thomas Lord's granddaughter Miss Florence Morse (Figure 6). As large as any in the village on a corner lot and graced with a relatively elaborate entrance portico, it is a lovely house. It is probably of Lord's own design as well as execution, since his personal motif or signature, the foliated rosette, appears conspicuously over the doors in the principal rooms. The exterior of the house is relatively correct academically for a building of his conception. The portico is, in general, taken from one illustrated in Benjamin's *Builders' Guide* and the pilaster order of the house itself is the one preferred by Deane. Lord also uses Deane's two strips in the pilaster panel, and the convex surface in the panel of the corner pilasters which Deane employs in the exterior of the Blue Hill Congregational church. But the cornice is Corinthian. This casual mixing of the orders reveals the unacademic carpenter. Further, in the charming little portico, the capital is too large in relation to the column as a whole. But there is something very pleasing in the way in which the smooth wooden cylindrical shaft rises abruptly from the simple rectangle of the granite stoop with no base to intervene. In the interior of the house the fireplaces show a very nice feeling for simple rectangular blocks of wood fitted together in a way not imitative of stone or stucco, yet preserving the basic formal balance and elegance of the Greek forms without actually using their details.

The Chase house, the home of the novelist Mary Ellen Chase and of her sister, is traditionally ascribed to Lord. It seems more consistent than does his own house with the work of Lord as we know it in his church buildings. The functional simplicity of the treatment of the orders and the forthright bold proportions of the whole building are reminiscent of the West Brooksville church. Like the Morse house, the Chase residence has handsome fireplaces.

The work of Lord in the little town of Blue Hill and its surroundings is representative of that great body of usually anonymous work which is part of our American folk tradition. This original architecture plays a larger part than is generally realized in

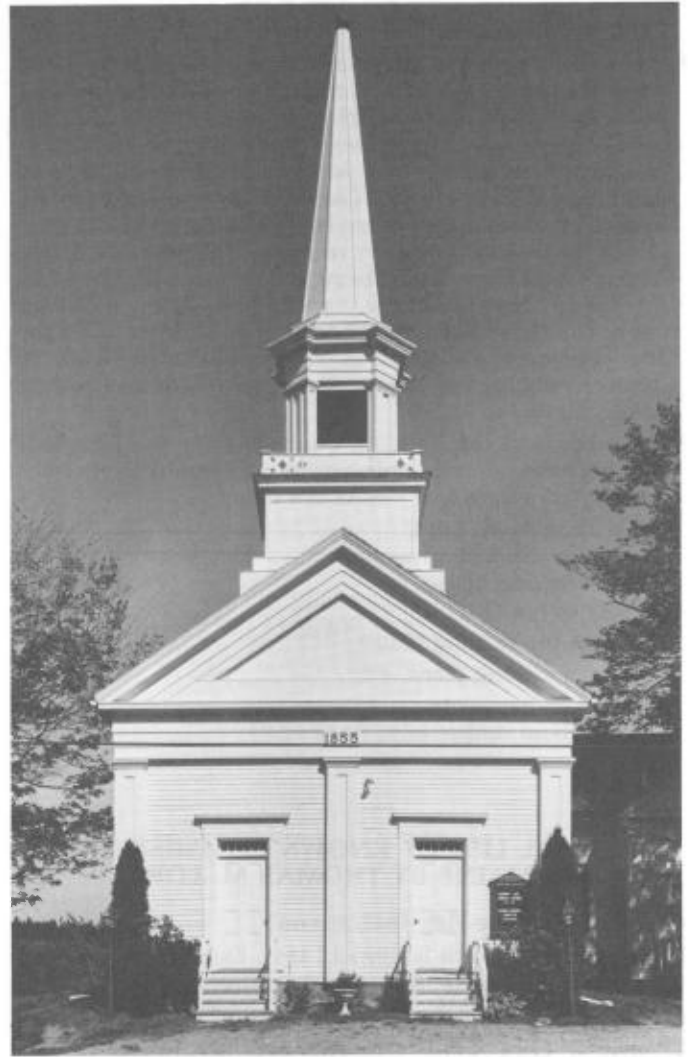


Figure 5. Baptist Church, West Brooksville, 1987 view (MHPC).

the whole picture of American formal expression in the arts. It has a peculiarly American quality very different from the better known work of the professional architect with his international standards, and in a way it seems more valid because of its fundamental respect for local conditions and materials.

Samuel M. Green
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Wesleyan University

Editor's Note: Professor Green published this essay on Thomas Lord in the October, 1947 issue of the *Magazine of Art*, and it is reprinted here with his permission. A distinguished teacher and writer on American art and architecture, Professor Green organized with the late Joseph Coburn Smith the first exhibition on Maine architecture while at Colby College in 1945. The Lord essay is a pioneering study of the career of a Maine architect - builder, and its value remains undiminished after forty years.

NOTES

¹ Deane was born in Thomaston, Maine, August 7, 1790, according to Cyrus Eaton's *History of Thomaston, Rockland, and South Thomaston, Maine*, which also states that he designed the Congregational church there, now destroyed. He died in Bangor on December 2, 1867, according to an announcement in the *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* of December 3rd. Unfortunately, nothing in Bangor can be attributed definitely to him, due to the destruction of city records in the fire of 1911. But he must have been active, being the only architect listed in the Bangor Directory in the years 1848-64. A few buildings can be almost attributed to him on stylistic evidence in Bangor and elsewhere. Deane is as yet an unknown figure in American architecture, but his distinctive style certainly merits further study.

² The records of the Building Committee for the Ellsworth meeting house among Lord's papers are interesting as a commentary on wages and fees of the time:

To Thomas M. Lord	
1846 to 138 ¼ days work	
on Meeting house	\$253.40
1847 to 214 ½ days	
work on Meeting house	392.80
4 days making plans, etc.	7.39
going to Bangor to	
see about timber	3.00
	<hr/> \$656.59

PARTIAL LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY THOMAS M. LORD

Chase House, Blue Hill, 1842, Extant
Baptist Church, North Sedgwick, 1845, Extant
Union Meeting House, Surry, 1846, Destroyed
Congregational Church, Ellsworth, 1846-47, Extant
Thomas M. Lord House, Blue Hill, 1847, Extant
Baptist Church, Brooklin, 1853, Extant
Baptist Church, West Brooksville, 1855, Extant
Baptist Church, Blue Hill, 1856, Extant
Baptist Church, South Penobscot, 1856, Destroyed



Figure 6. Thomas M. Lord House, Blue Hill, 1945 view (MHPC).

Abstracts from Notes of Thomas M. Lord furnished to the Maine Historic Preservation Commission in 1973 by Arthur C. Havlin:

Began at my trade May 10th, 1828. Have worked on 83 vessels, more or less — 84 dwelling houses; 12 school houses; 14 meeting houses and other public buildings; 15 barns and sheds; 10 stern mouldings and heads; 250 coffins, and 5 stores besides sashes and blinds and other work. It's a work of 52 years. 10th of May 1880. Worked on:

	dwelling houses	school houses	meeting houses
Ellsworth	8	8	1
Trenton	2	2	0
Surry	12	1	1
Blue Hill	60	0	3
Sedgwick	1	1	1
So. W. Harbor	0	0	1
Brooklin	0	0	1
Brooksville	0	0	1
Penobscot	0	0	1

Photograph of Thomas M. Lord
Courtesy of Blue Hill Historical Society

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